



Matches – 9 Dec 1967 – Liverpool 2 Leeds United 0

First Division – Anfield – 39,675

Scorers: None

Liverpool: Lawrence, Lawler, Byrne, Smith, Strong, Hughes, Callaghan, Hunt, Hateley, St John, Thompson

Leeds United: Sprake, Reaney, Cooper, Bremner, Charlton, Hunter, Greenhoff, Lorimer, Madeley, Belfitt, Gray



On occasion a player’s entire career is defined by a single incident in a single match – in December 1967, that was certainly the case for Leeds United keeper Gary Sprake when he paid a visit to Anfield, home of mighty Liverpool.



At the time, the two teams were in hot pursuit of the League championship in a four-way battle with the two Manchester clubs, United and City. Three points separated the teams but it was Liverpool (1 defeat in 8) and Leeds (9 points from the last 12) that were the sides in form. With such a close race, the points at stake were vital for both clubs.

Phil Brown in the Evening Post: “November turned up trumps for Leeds United after all. In its 30 days they jacked themselves up to fourth in the First Division, made themselves a place in the quarter finals of the League Cup, and came back from Belgrade leading 2-1 in the Fairs Cup after a performance just as sterling as that they put up at Nottingham last week.

“They could really be in the groove again. Time will tell, but personally and possibly cautiously I want to get the memory of their injuries and their falterings against Coventry City and Sheffield United just a little further away.

“Today’s game against Stoke at Elland Road – I write before it – next Wednesday’s return Fairs Cup game with Partizan (a fine hard side if their hearts were not broken on Wednesday, and it didn’t look like it), and the visit to Anfield (I almost wrote the visit to the Kop) next Saturday should tell plenty.

“In the meantime, there was no mistaking the tremendous and sustained upsurge of their form as a team against the Forest and against Partizan. Those two wins were 90 minute wins with United looking the winners before half time.”



Yorkshire Post 11 December 1967 carrying Eric Stanger’s report of Gary Sprake’s fateful day at Anfield

Leeds had Paul Madeley and Rod Belfitt replacing the injured Johnny Giles and £100,000 centre-forward Mick Jones, but were otherwise at full strength, while Liverpool were forced into only their third change of the season, with Geoff Strong deputising for the injured Ron Yeats and World Cup

and he thought better of the quick throw. Roger Hunt was still close by, but represented little danger. Sprake intended to clutch the ball to his chest and readjust his position before clearing more safely. Stanger: “When he carried on with his throw the ball, instead of leaving his gloved palm near the top of the arc, stayed there for one split second and, on being released, it sailed over his left shoulder into the net.”

It is said, apocryphally, that referee Jim Finney, who had missed the incident, asked Jack Charlton what had happened and what he should do. According to Sprake and Johnson, “With typical dry humour Jack replied, ‘I think the silly so and so has thrown it in his own net; you’ll have to give a goal.’”

Sprake stood transfixed with despair for seemingly an eternity as the enormity of what he had done settled upon him. It was a spectacular own goal, one of the most memorable of all time, and Sprake clearly wished that the Anfield turf would open up and swallow him whole in his moment of misery.

Billy Bremner consoled his distraught keeper as the teams went off at the interval, but Anfield was ready to turn the screw. During the break, the home club’s disc jockey waggishly featured Des O’Connor’s No 1 hit of the time, ‘Careless Hands’, and The Scaffold’s ‘Thank U Very Much’ in sarcastic tribute to the Welshman.

Few teams fight back from a goal down at Anfield, let alone two, and United simply did not have the firepower or momentum to get back into the game after half time. Billy Bremner (“moving like a ballet dancer on the difficult surface” – Stanger) did his best to inspire his troops, covering every blade of grass on the pitch. He operated exclusively as an auxiliary striker over the final 20 minutes (“where he usually kept three men occupied” according to Brian Crowther in the Guardian), but he could not turn the game single-handed. All United’s attempts to get on the scoresheet came to naught, as Crowther reported: “The more men Leeds brought into attack the more disorderly they became.”

Stanger was similarly unimpressed: “Apart from a couple of shots by Lorimer, Leeds never looked like scoring and, though the patched up attack can do well on occasion, it lacks the drive and experience to master such defences as Liverpool’s. Freak goal or not, Leeds could have no complaints. Liverpool won well.”

It was a grim day for Don Revie’s men and the result brought an unceremonious end to their good run, but the lasting memory was the forlorn figure of Sprake, soundlessly asking himself “Why me?”

History seldom deals in shades of grey and Sprake has been pilloried for his habitual mistakes, but at the time he was accorded more generous consideration. Stanger: “It was not a silly mistake but a freakish happening caused by the slippery ball on the snowbound pitch ... I doubt if Sprake could repeat it if he tried. I did not blame him for a moment, nor did his colleagues or manager, Mr Don Revie ... Sprake, to his credit, turned the ribald jeers of the notorious Spion Kop to cheers by his second half display.”

Terry Lofthouse in the Evening Post: “Although Gary Sprake gave away perhaps the most amazing goal seen on a soccer pitch in the defeat at Anfield, nobody on United’s staff could blame him or did. Up to that point Sprake had made several good saves and in the second half, to his great credit,



The cover of the Des O'Connor single that is forever associated with Gary Sprake

he never allowed the incident to upset him and his excellent effort brought admiration.”

Tom German in the Times: “Carelessness or sheer misfortune, one could only sympathise with Sprake, who later regained his undoubted stature with some characteristic saves.”

Sprake himself was remarkably philosophical about the incident, saying later: “Obviously I wish I hadn’t made any mistakes but it is an inevitable part of being a goalkeeper. I have read lots of comments that I was nervous and that I somehow lost my confidence due to the mistakes but this was never the case. I openly admit that before a game I would be terribly nervous and sometimes be physically sick but I had been like that since the start of my career. Once I started the game I would be fine and, although I would be angry at myself and disappointed if I made an error, I can honestly say it never affected my confidence. If I made a mistake, I would put it behind me and get on with the game. I think the games where I made mistakes prove that, such as at Anfield. Even though I scored the own goal, during the second half I played really well.

"That day at Liverpool I actually had a good game. At half-time the lads told me, 'Come on, get yourself together. We can do better'.

We never criticised each other apart from me and Big Jack [Charlton], and that was all forgotten afterwards. I never got much stick off the supporters, then or now. It has mainly been the ex-players' books."

*I let my heart fall into careless hands
Careless hands broke my heart in two
You held my dreams like worthless grains of sand
Careless hands don't care when dreams slip through
I brought you joy
And girl I loved you so
But all that sunshine didn't make the roses grow
If you don't change
Someday you'll know the sorrow of careless hands
That can't hold onto love.*

Down the years the criticism of Gary Sprake has probably been overplayed, but that day at Anfield wouldn’t be the last time that the keeper made a high profile error on the big stage. It is doubtful, though, that there was ever a more famous gaffe.